

2017 will bring urgency to state's K-12 school funding

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Last week, the Washington Legislature codified what observers had assumed all along: That sorting out how to pay for the state's efforts to meet the state Supreme Court's McCleary ruling will take too long in a short, election-year session. After last week's legislative action, a definitive decision won't come until 2017, one year before the court's deadline.

The Legislature's task is vexing, no doubt. But last week's action — more correctly, a deferral of real action — heightens the urgency of arriving at a resolution next year.

On Tuesday, the state Senate passed a compromise bill, identical to a House-passed measure that would set up a task force to resolve the state's overreliance on local school levies. It also would seek from school districts more information about where local levy money goes; lawmakers want to know how much is allocated to items like teacher salaries, which the state is supposed to be covering.

The Senate passed the bill on a narrow 26-23 vote, but without the partisan tint that has accompanied narrow votes in recent years. Almost equal numbers of Democrats and Republicans both favored and opposed it. The House version found much broader support, passing 66-31.

To its credit, the Legislature has taken serious steps toward meeting the terms of the McCleary decision, which came in 2012 when the court ruled the state was not meeting its paramount duty of adequately funding K-12 education. In last year's session, the Legislature plowed more than \$2 billion extra into areas like all-day kindergarten, smaller K-3 classes, student transportation and classroom supplies.

But that didn't satisfy the court, which says the state still hasn't addressed funding inequities that result from a reliance on local levies. The court has fined the state \$100,000 a day, though the fine doesn't mean that much; the money is being held in an educational trust account and presumably will be worked into any funding arrangement that the Legislature eventually develops.

Arriving at that arrangement will be tricky. A bipartisan group from the House and Senate met over the summer but could not work out a compromise on replacing the local levy system. A reduction in local levies will require an increased share of state property taxes going to education; lawmakers in wealthier westside districts fear that could lead to a property tax increase. Meanwhile, any change that alters the current levy equalization formula, which compensates school districts in relatively property-poor areas such as the Yakima Valley, likewise will get intense scrutiny from lawmakers representing affected districts.

The Legislature wants to end its 60-day session on time in March and get out of town — most lawmakers are up for re-election this year, and they can't raise money for their campaigns while the Legislature is in session. That leaves 2017 -- a non-election year and the last one before the court's deadline for compliance -- as the year that lawmakers must put aside disagreements and solve the state's school-funding puzzle.

* Members of the Yakima Herald-Republic editorial board are Bob Crider, Frank Purdy and Karen Troianello.